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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000471

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI SENDS UP TRIAL BALLOON ON
U.S.-SYRIA DIALOGUE ON LEBANON

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C). Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri continues to seek internal and international support for his proposal to relaunch the National Dialogue, framing it as a continuation of the Arab League initiative and the only way to reach a solution to the ongoing political crisis. He criticized LAF commander General Michel Sleiman's announcement that he would retire in August as a miscalculated attempt to force the opposing parties to move forward with the presidential election, which would instead backfire by encouraging other presidential hopefuls to wait it out. Berri, who plans to travel to Syria soon, also is offering to play a mediator role between Damascus and Washington. End summary.

12. (C) Charge Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and his advisor Ali Hamdan at Berri's office in Ain el-Tineh on April 4. The Charge began the meeting by noting that two of Berri's colleagues, "resigned" Foreign Minister Salloukh and Deputy Director of Intelligence and Lebanese Liaison Officer with UNIFIL (G-2) Staff Brigadier General Abdulruhman Shehaitly had both encouraged her to meet again with the Speaker. "I don't need emissaries," Berri replied lightly, though he later described Salloukh as someone who "obeyed" him.

13. (C) The Charge, noting that a recent "Now Lebanon" poll showed that only nine percent of the respondents believed Berri's proposal to relaunch the National Dialogue would solve the political crisis, asked about public reaction to the proposal. The Speaker, quick as ever to the punch, quipped, "Nine percent is good...especially since the organization is pro-March 14!" If a pro-March 8 group had conducted the poll, he laughed, 100 percent would have voted affirmatively.

14. (C) Turning serious, Berri said that everyone in Lebanon wanted a solution, regardless of who initiates the proposal, as the situation was becoming very heavy ("pesant"). Asked why not hold the dialogue in parliament, Berri said he would

gladly open the doors, provided the Siniora government was not present. He denied accusations that he had closed parliament, insisting he had opened it 17 times for the purpose of holding an electoral session. Furthermore, the two issues on the Dialogue's agenda (cabinet formation and the electoral law) were already being discussed "in the hallways" and did not need parliament.

15. (C) Claiming the Arab League initiative (which he described as a basket including the election of the president, cabinet formation, and the electoral law) stemmed from his own previous initiative to resolve the deadlock, Berri said his latest proposal was an effort to help revive the Arab League effort. The National Dialogue is the only thing that can save us, he said. We've agreed on the consensus candidate, and the two remaining issues are cabinet formation and the electoral law.

16. (C) The first is merely a question of proportions, not portfolios, he insisting, adding that 10-10-10 was his idea; if they agreed on 10-10-10, the crisis is solved, because then a new cabinet would be formed, parliament would return to work, and its first order of business would be to draft a new electoral law. All we need to agree for the moment is that the elections will be based on "qada" (small districts), he said, reminding us that he himself opposed the qada system but accepted it "for the sake of the Christians."

17. (C) However, all parties needed to accept the National Dialogue before he could proceed. The opposition was already on board, he reported, as well as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, Transportation Minister Mohamad Safadi, and Future MP Ghassan Tueini. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, however, had rejected it (see septel for Geagea's views), while Saad Hariri had yet to provide an official response, although the "people on his

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list and those around him" were saying it was a "waste of time." (Note: Saad's advisor and cousin Nader Hariri used exactly those words in a separate meeting with Pol/Econ Chief. End note.)

TALKING TO THE SYRIANS

18. (C) The Dialogue also needed the support of the international community. If March 14 agreed to the Dialogue, Berri continued, he would then travel to Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to gain Arab support. I will start with Syria this time, Berri said, since it had been two years since his last visit and because it now holds the Arab League chairmanship. He then slipped in an implicit (and anticipated -- see comment) offer to serve as mediator between Damascus and Washington, stating that the Syrians "need to talk to the U.S."

19. (C) Berri then shifted gears, asking what the U.S. position was on the Dialogue. The Charge responded that it was up to the Lebanese, and not the U.S. to decide. However, since a forum for national dialogue already existed in the parliament, it would seem more democratic to hold the discussions there, where the entire country was represented, rather than limiting the Dialogue to a few party leaders. Berri repeated that he would gladly hold it in parliament, provided the Siniora government steps down first.

SLEIMAN'S MISCALCULATION
ON THE PRESIDENCY

110. (C) Berri viewed Michel Sleiman's April 3 announcement that he would retire in August, three months before the end of his commission, as an attempt to push the opposing parties toward an election. However, it was a mistake, he argued; by announcing it four months in advance, this would only

encourage "those with presidential aspirations" to delay the election through the summer in hopes of boosting their own chances.

¶11. (C) Regarding his recent comments in favor of former presidential candidate Jean Obeid, Berri said Obeid has always been his preferred candidate, if the problem of the constitutional amendment prevented Michel Sleiman from gaining the nomination. Unfortunately, he joked, the Syrians say he's American and vice-versa...which only proves he's independent!

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Ali Hamdan had pre-briefed us on the Speaker's desire to play a mediator role between Washington and Damascus. Although we warned Hamdan that the issue was a non-starter, Berri apparently decided to make the offer, albeit in such an indirect way that he could plausibly deny it should the need arise. Listening to Berri's version of reality, one would almost believe that the solution to Lebanon's myriad and multi-layered political crisis was simple: agreement on 10-10-10 (which he now suddenly claims as his own idea, whereas in the past he insisted that Saad was the one to propose it) and on the qada (small district) system. We highly doubt even Berri believes this to be the case: neither side is likely to agree to an even cabinet split without assurances on key portfolios; and even if parties agree in principle on the qada system, the question then becomes which qada, and how to delineate them to everyone's satisfaction (a Herculean if not impossible task -- even parties of the same coalition cannot agree).

¶14. (C) Unfortunately, we view Berri's efforts to relaunch the National Dialogue as his umpteenth attempt to regain the initiative, prove to the world that he is hard at work trying to find a solution, and ultimately set himself up in a position to blame others if the initiative fails. As he did with the Arab League initiative, he will blame any lack of overt U.S. support for his proposal for an eventual failure. If, on the other hand, we do give it our public blessing, he

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will then attempt to use it to force March 14 to make concessions, and ultimately hold them responsible for derailing any solution that "had the support of the U.S." In Berri's world, it is always the others who are to blame.
SISON